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REAGAN SENDS FLEET TO LIBYA TO TEST KHADAFY

By NILES LATHEM

Bureau Chief

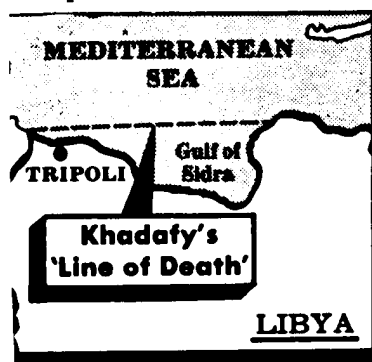
WASHINGTON — President Reagan is dramatically escalating military pressure on Libyan leader Moammar Khadafy this week with planned naval exercises near the Libyan coast.

U.S. officials say the exercises could lead to a "direct confrontation."

The Pentagon recently ordered the aircraft carrier USS America to join a massive U.S. naval armada, which already includes two other aircraft carriers, in the Mediterranean.

A Pentagon spokesman, Commander Richard Schramm, said the government filed a notice of intent with international aviation authorities that it will be conducting aerial maneuvers "in the Tripoli flight information region" from 7 a.m. today to 7 p.m. tomorrow (New York time).

He said that the operation would be conducted in "international waters" and would be "non-provocative and routine."



New York Post: Victoria Fischer

But sources told The Post last night that commanders of the fleet have been given the green light to conduct exercises inside the Gulf of Sidra, which Libya claims to be its territorial waters.

Officials say that while there are no plans to provoke a confrontation, they are well aware that Khadafy has vowed to attack any airplane or ship that ventures inside the gulf.

"If that happens, we have the excuse we need to go in and take real action," said a senior administration official without elaboration.

The new naval exercise recalls the incident in 1981, in which two Libyan war jets were shot down by U.S. planes in a dogfight in the Gulf of Sidra.

Escalation of military pressure on Khadafy was approved last week by the National Security Council in the wake of new intelligence reports revealing that Khadafy is "continuing to back international terrorism."

Intelligence agencies say there is strong circumstantial evidence that Khadafy has tried on at least three occasions to launch terrorist strikes against U.S. and Israeli targets in Europe and may be planning other attacks in the near future.

In one incident, a hit team loyal to Khadafy's main terror-



MOAMMAR KHADAFY
Under pressure.

ist lieutenant, Abu Nidal, that was prevented from conducting an assassination attempt on Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres was tracked in the Netherlands last January.

The U.S. fleet, which totals nearly two dozen ships, has been stationed near Libya since last December in the wake of the terrorist attacks in the Rome and Vienna airports.

U.S. officials note that once the fleet is assembled, there is enough firepower to do significant damage to the Libyan armed forces.

Each aircraft carrier is equipped with as many as 90 fighter jets and bombers anti-aircraft missiles.